

## A Strategy Framework for the Intelligence Analyst

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Since joining CIA in 1985, I've had my share of “out of body” sojourns outside of the CIA's Directorate of Intelligence, my home component. These rotational jobs are critical for analysts, or any intelligence officer, to develop new perspectives. After 15 years in the trenches of what is now the Analysis Group of the CIA's Information Operations Center—interrupted by deployments in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom during 2002 and 2003—I had the opportunity to spend the past three years on the faculty of the National War College (NWC), part of the National Defense University at Ft. McNair in downtown Washington, DC.

While there I taught or attended the core courses at NWC and ran electives I created on intelligence, cyber strategy issues, and even WW I strategy. I should note here that “teachers” at NWC are called “Faculty Seminar Leaders” (FSLs). Their jobs are to leverage the combined insights and expertise of classes of a dozen senior military and civilian officers into thoughtful, informed discussions about national security topics. FSLs don't lecture as much as they listen.

This experience greatly expanded my horizons beyond the Intelligence Community (and military) and demonstrated how analysts must understand the broader context in

which senior policymakers work. As intelligence officers, we obviously must be keenly aware of the foreign issues we assess and the context of the intelligence we provide to policymakers. It also behooves us to know the strategic context of policymakers themselves—the cognitive and national security framework they consciously (or simply instinctively) use to make policy.

The National War College was formed right after WW II. Dwight Eisenhower and George C. Marshall both believed that the war had shown the critical need for the US military to plan and operate jointly. They thought the country needed a national-level war college with a more strategic focus than that provided by the individual armed services. While we take “jointness” for granted today, in the late 1940s this was a bold change in how the United States made and executed national military strategy. George F. Kennan wrote his famous “Sources of Soviet Conduct” at the National War College, which publicly outlined the basic architecture of Cold War containment strategy towards the USSR. Colin Powell and the current chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Gen. Martin Dempsey, are among its graduates. And CIA's own dean of intelligence analysis, Sherman Kent, served on its faculty.

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NWC's goal is to develop national security strategists—leaders whose thinking and perspectives today go beyond joint, or interservice planning and operations, who think strategically and globally about US security. It emphasizes interagency or “whole of government” approaches to national strategy. NWC cultivates military officers and civilians to understand better all the instruments of national power, beyond the military, including diplomatic, economic, and intelligence. Students there also learn how factors such as chance, time, culture, and unchanging human nature can affect strategy and impact policy.

The student body is a rich mixture of about 230 senior US military, typically O-6 (colonels and navy captains) and GS15-level civilian interagency officers. Since the 1990s this mix each year has included several CIA students and a CIA faculty representative. In addition, each year over 30 foreign military officers join NWC for its nine month academic year of instruction. NWC students

are invariably “Type A” leaders, professional problem solvers who until this point in their careers have been heavily focused on operations within their fields and services. They are accustomed to “fixing things” and to running at least mid-size organizations—some considerably larger than units in the Intelligence Community.

Until this point in their careers, however, they have not often paused to think strategically and in the long-term about the US role in the world, US power, and other actors on the world stage with whom the United States must contend. Of course, this component is familiar ground for the intelligence analyst, and this is where CIA arguably provides the most value in decisionmaking.

With this as background, I've tried in the following to distill three years as the CIA faculty representative to the National War College into what one may simplistically call an “intelligence analyst's strategy framework.” The relevance of this for

intelligence officers is that some (hopefully most) of the items on this list at one time or another run through the minds of senior leaders who use our products. For the Intelligence Community's burgeoning cadre of newer analysts, I hope this will be useful framework to allow intelligence analysts to step out of their usual perspectives on intelligence.

***1. “Ends, ways, and means” must be commensurate with strategy.***

This is actually the first “big lesson” the National War College tries to inculcate in students. The “ends” are just that, the goals or intended strategic outcomes. The “ways” are how one implements strategy, how one executes plans. The “means” are the various instruments of hard and soft national power used to do it.

Hard power equates to overt pressure and may or may not involve the threat or actual use of military force. Soft power is more difficult to quantify. Just as Dark Matter is said to account for most of the mass in the universe, so too does soft power, in defiance of empirical metrics, account for most of what we think of as “international relations.”

If any one of these “means” is insufficient, the strategy will struggle. Note that in this formula “ends” actually come first. Before engaging any strategy, before making any plans, or thinking about resources, one must know clearly what the goal is. If one cannot clearly articulate this to the first 10 people one encounters in a shopping mall or baseball game, that person needs to go back to the drawing board and figure out what exactly he or she is trying to achieve strategically.



The National War College was established in 1946. Its earliest faculty included George F. Kennan and Sherman Kent, both strategic thinkers. (Photo: Roosevelt Hall ca. 1933. Library of Congress Digital Collection)

The intelligence officer's job is not to second-guess policymakers, nor judge whether they have adequately balanced ends, ways, and means. Nor of course does the intelligence officer provide policy recommendations. That said, it would be useful for the intelligence analyst to know with reasonable granularity what the US agenda is—the ends, ways, and means—to a given actor, region, or issue.

For example, the so-called “Powell Doctrine”—applied during the liberation of Kuwait from Iraq in 1991—called for the use of overwhelming force to subdue an enemy. Defense Secretary Rumsfeld did not embrace the doctrine for Iraq in 2003. No military analyst of that period would have worked in ignorance of the US order of battle, much diminished from that deployed in 1991, nor of the forces and objectives in Iraq with which the US force still had to contend.

## ***2. Know the domestic context of an adversary or subject.***

This is arguably the first order of business for the intelligence analyst—to put into context our subject and the domestic developments that surround it. But what is “context”? Simply put, for our purposes, context is the broad framework within which a foreign decisionmaker acts or an event or process occurs. Context is temporal and spatial. It may be a very immediate, contemporary phenomenon. It may extend no further back than yesterday and no further into the future than tomorrow. For other actors, context extends back decades or even centuries. It may refer only to a small group of actors and variables that feed a late-breaking situation. It may be tempo-

rally narrow but regionally, politically, socially, and economically broad. The strategist must know as much about these contexts as possible, and that's where intelligence officers come in.

The Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese people may see as a natural process that nation's reemergence onto the world stage after their “century of humiliation,” while the United States and its neighbors react with alarm. Chinese forays into the South China Sea and beyond may have as much a domestic political context and function as an external geostrategic one.

A direct corollary of the importance of knowing a foreign actor's domestic context is that history matters. Americans may bemoan US impatience and ignorance of history. Some cultures however are prisoners of theirs. Senior policymakers and intelligence officers do not need PhDs in history, nor is history deterministic. But since those we serve make history, we must all appreciate history's role in decisionmaking, ours and our adversary's. When the West offers “carrot and stick” incentives to suspend nuclear research, Iranians retort that such an approach may be suitable for a donkey but not for a civilization that built Persepolis two millennia before the idea of a Europe even existed.

## ***3. Never assume an adversary is a unitary, let alone rational, actor.***

We should not make “Teheran” or “Iran” subjects of sentences explaining behavior or acts unless we specifically want to imply that Iran acts, or even thinks, as a unitary actor. There are powerful domestic political reasons for various factions in

Tehran to pursue nuclear research in addition to reasons related to external security.

Any organization of human beings will produce factions, and all but the most totalitarian ones must take into account the desires and reactions of these factions within their own society. Precisely because factions are susceptible to subjective drivers, we cannot expect these groups to behave entirely rationally or predictably. Thus, we must not expect such regimes always to act in their own long, or even short-term, interest, at least as we would calculate them. Conversely, we cannot expect them to have finely-tuned diplomatic or other antennae to detect and accurately interpret signals the US government may be attempting to send.

This rule also has a corollary: ***Tribalism, custom, and fear trump facts, reason, and logic most of the time.*** Political economy, for example, basically teaches that leaders make decisions and states act as they do because it is in their economic self-interest to do so. In this view, history—and the actions of current leaders—consists of a series of essentially rational decisions, conceived through careful calculation, and executed with an accountant's regard for political and economic margins, losses, and profit. The reality is that political economy is invariably a factor but not a driver in foreign decisionmaking. Most of the time, being culturally Chinese, Russian, or Iranian will be relatively more important factors in the decisions those states make and actions they take than what their economic or even security ledger sheets might suggest.

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**4. Time is on no one's side for long.**

Time has eager servants. These are chance and imponderables and fog and friction. Always be prepared for the services they render. Fog and friction were terms coined by military theorist Carl von Clausewitz. He wrote that war was marked by fog and friction—the opaqueness of the battlefield and the resistance of the enemy to our actions. So too are fog and friction rife in any intelligence-related dilemma. In the end, history and pundits will not judge a strategist on how well his plan succeeded but on how well he adapted it to the inevitable change that time and chance played upon his strategy. Even if time seems to work to one's advantage, random events will cause strategy to stumble. Time revels in technical and human glitches, some as empirical as the weather or as subjective as emotion.

In intelligence, this touches upon the issue of predictive analysis. We struggle mightily to provide timely information to senior decisionmakers. We may excel at providing snapshots of ground truth unavailable from other sources, as well as its context. But that ground truth can be intensely sensitive to small changes over time and will change dramatically. Thus, we are probably on firmer ground when we identify dynamic forces and discreet actors and events that can cause a situation to deviate from a norm (or at least its current trajectory) than we are when we predict what an “end state” will be at a given point in the future.

Finally, the role of time in our analytic efforts also is related to the old

adage about “secrets” and “mysteries.” Our adversaries have secrets that we as intelligence officers attempt to steal or learn. The future however is unknown not only to us but to our adversaries as well. It is a mystery in the classic sense of the word, meaning it is largely unknowable. In this context time levels playing fields: all states and actors, no matter how rich or powerful, weak or unstable, are fairly ignorant of the future.

**5. Always identify, and periodically recheck, assumptions.**

Again this is familiar territory for the intelligence analyst. But intelligence professionals are not the only players in the security world who need to do this. A saying at the National War College is, “If your assumptions are wrong, nothing else will be right.” It's acceptable to have assumptions, but as any good intelligence analyst knows, they must be identified early on. Especially important is identification of “linchpin” assumptions, which, if wrong, render moot everything else thought to follow from them.

One must also periodically recheck assumptions because, time, again, will play its role in any action or process. Time, even by itself, alters what strategists in the Soviet Union used to call the “correlation of forces”—the complex balance sheets of power between states and actors. Put simply, over time, situations will change and past assumptions may become irrelevant.

Senior policymakers and intelligence professionals are probably

more averse than most to use of the word “inevitable.” It is a word heavily laden with assumptions. No war or armed clash for example is inevitable, though certainly conflict, competition, and even chaos may often be the rule rather than the exception for some regions. World War I was not inevitable, no more than is a future clash with China. But the approaching centennial of the outbreak of WW I reminds the analyst and strategist that 1914 is what happens when all pre-war assumptions are proven wrong—and there is no Plan B.

**6. Have a Plan B, but remember, strategy trumps plans.**

Strategy is what leaders or organizations are trying to do and where they want to go; plans are maps for getting there. Plans are not an end in themselves but means to ends. If strategy is flawed, and so problematic that it actually works against an organization's best long-term interests, then all the planning staffs in the Pentagon or around Washington's Beltway won't help.

As is often said in the military, “No plan survives first contact with the enemy.” Nonetheless, military staffs are meticulous planners, but good leaders are prepared to throw their plans out or significantly revise them at any moment. The challenge is to know when Plan A as originally conceived can no longer succeed and to be ready to adapt it when necessary.

Nor is hope a strategy. This is a lesson from Thucydides and his *History of the Peloponnesian Wars*, a foundational text at the war college. In the famous Melian Dialog, the Melians placed their survival on the hope that Sparta would rescue them or that something else would sud-

denly intervene in their favor to spare them from Athens' ruthless ultimatum. One cannot commit national power in a way that the outcome hinges on hope alone. Intelligence officers, by the way, are the enemy of hope, because it is their job to dispel the mystery and ignorance that can lead a strategist to rely on hope rather than on facts and critical assessment.

Intelligence officers invariably spend their days (and nights) providing policymakers with bad news. This may give the intelligence officer a reputation for being unduly pessimistic (recall former CIA Director and Defense Secretary Robert Gates, who said that when he saw flowers he wondered for whose funeral they were gathered).

***7. Thucydides was right: States go to war for only three reasons: fear, honor, or because (their leaders believe) it is in their interest to do so.***

This maxim of war has pretty much stood the test of 23 centuries. Countries go to war because a foreign actor has made their leaders or people afraid, or because they are afraid not to go to war. They go to war because it would be shameful not to go to war. Or they go to war because they decide that at that moment it is simply in their best interest to do so.

Of crucial importance is the realization that the character of war constantly changes but its nature never has. War is about hurting and killing people and damaging and destroying property. That is its eternal nature. How we defend ourselves from other tribes—usually driven by technical and economic factors—is in constant change. That is its character. For this reason alone we should

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refrain from casual references to war, such as “war on poverty,” “war on drugs,” or “cyber war.” This most basic of concepts is not a trivial academic exercise. Intelligence officers must recognize that at this moment a significant debate stirs in the US military about the proper way to defeat a guerilla insurgency—whether one “wins” this kind of war by the traditional, kinetic means of killing insurgents or by eliminating the socioeconomic conditions that spawn and grow them.

There is a corollary to this rule: No state has ever started a war in anticipation of a long struggle of attrition. States that start wars invariably assume the war will be a short one. The only exception to this may be when a state decides to sponsor a guerilla campaign against an enemy. These struggles by definition are protracted conflicts.

Finally, just as war's character changes, so too does its utility to states and other actors. Advances in weapons technologies and in military and societal organization and governance do not spread evenly through time and space; asymmetries emerge, plateau, or even dead-end (again, time is the final arbiter here). War may favor one actor in one generation and another in the next. Its innate violence however, derived from human nature, does not change.

***8. Whatever one's strategy or plans may be, adversaries get to vote on them—and sometimes he votes before the planned move is finished.***

It is acceptable for intelligence officers to inform policymakers of the likely reactions of foreign actors to US initiatives or to identify leverage points for US policymakers. But we must remember that foreign actions may also be attempts to seize the initiative in a situation and not simply reactions to US initiatives.

Because of time, the game is not always sequential and orderly, especially when an adversary acts to seize the initiative. Thus, those who carry out strategy and plans—and the intelligence officers who support them—must be wary of straight-line, linear thinking. Parts A, B, then C, and so on of a plan are not always executed sequentially. Rather, adversaries will often carry out their efforts in parallel with other actions in both time and space.

In either case, a strategist does not act in a vacuum. Nor should the intelligence officer. The other side is always in play. In an intelligence context an adversary will always try and keep his secrets from us and attempt to deceive us. He will do this passively, through denial and deception activities, and actively, through offensive counterintelligence operations.

***9. Embrace complexity, uncertainty, and unpredictability.***

These three factors cannot be eliminated but they can be harnessed, remembering they apply to all sides

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in a conflict. Complexity means the issues leaders grapple with will repel simplistic, inflexible solutions or approaches. Uncertainty paradoxically demands an actor to be decisive, to act on information or situational awareness that is imperfect or just “good enough.”

The relationship here between a senior decisionmaker and the intelligence officer is clear. Intelligence officers by definition can only provide imprecise and usually time-sensitive information to support a decision that is often designed simply to produce the fewest possible (and known) bad side effects. This is the classic definition of a dilemma: a situation in which all the options are bad in some way or another.

The danger is that uncertainty can become an excuse for inaction or delay. Unpredictability reminds us that the future is unknowable, uncontrollable, but not necessarily beyond our influence. Combined, these factors require a strategist to develop flexible and adaptive thinking and behavior. It is in this context that intelligence officers should prepare, and the policymakers use, intelligence.

Another corollary emerges: the Law of Unintended Consequences. Because of a situation’s complexity (or regardless of its apparent simplicity), no matter what intelligence tells a policymaker or what he decides, unforeseen outcomes and effects will result. This is perhaps the only instance in which the intelligence analyst should use the word “inevitable.”

Uncertainty, like time, can level the playing field between adversaries. If “X” is an unintended result of “A,” then we must ask, “unintended by whom?” It may have been equally unanticipated by both sides in a conflict.

***10. Finally, it is more important to understand the question than to hasten to produce an answer.***

Bureaucracies are adept at producing answers that wander in search of a question. Thus, one of the most valuable assets a strategist and intelligence officer can have is the ability and time to listen, observe, and assess. Whatever strategic issue the policymaker struggles with, no matter how perilous or mundane, he must always know the key strategy and security issues at stake. The challenge of course is that during crises, or even in the ordinary press of time, senior actors may not be as thoughtful as they are simply forced to be reactive.

Thus, for the intelligence analyst identification and understanding of the key questions that drive an issue are organic to getting right those strategic “ends” mentioned earlier. The sad truth is that if a senior policymaker doesn’t ask the right question, the answer won’t matter. Put differently, before intelligence officers give a policymaker an answer, they must be certain they are addressing the right question. Remembering this, intelligence officers may have (somewhat) more time than the policymaker to frame an issue in its proper context, to identify the key questions in play, and assess the implications of actions.

Sometimes we can address this on a tactical, even simplistic level by

making certain that as taskings come down to us through the hierarchy, the original intent of the policymaker isn’t lost in bureaucratic translations. This can be as simple as getting as close as possible to the original question the policymaker asked. But no matter how pressed for time, the intelligence officer must always pause and consider why a particular question was asked, what its context was, and most challenging of all, anticipate what the next question will be once an answer has been provided.

In conclusion, this article makes passing references to “rules,” “laws,” and “corollaries.” These word choices are of course a literary convention; nothing is assured in strategy and intelligence except for uncertainty. Typical National War College students, especially those in uniform, enter that institution having spent almost 20 years learning to identify and minimize uncertainty. They know what the fog of war is and have been promoted to senior ranks by acting decisively. They know that uncertainty and hesitation can cost lives, equipment, and missions. At the war college, they are suddenly thrust into a full-time learning regimen in which they are encouraged to expect, even embrace, uncertainty. It is an uncomfortable environment for them, some of whom will rise to multistar flag rank and lead their services.

It is in this context that I’ve offered this strategy framework for intelligence analysts. It is to remind us how senior decisionmakers (ideally) develop US national security strategy—and how our murky, uncertain world of intelligence analysis is often for them an alien environment.

